

Epiphany 1-RCL-2022

January 9, 2022—At Church of the Advent, Hatboro, PA

By the Rev. Naz Javier, Priest-in-Charge

Isaiah 43:1-7 | Acts 8:14-17 | Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As we draw near to you, O God: may your Word be the wisdom spoken; may your Word be the message heard; may your Word be light to guide us as you also send us into the world. In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. (cf. Deuteronomy 5:27)

1. We often hear that “actions speak louder than words;” or that to have some level of credibility, we “need to put our money where our mouth is.” In a world that bombards us with a proliferation of opinions that, at times, also obscures or even blurs what is true and what is good, we crave for something credible—something tangible; or at least tangible enough to someone who is real to us. I believe that today’s Feast—the Baptism of Jesus—and for that matter, our recollection of our participation in the Sacrament of Baptism--we’re given not just more words of a promise but rather some concrete manifestations—albeit manifestations in the form of challenges—of God’s ongoing presence and action in the world.
2. We don’t get many stories of Jesus’ childhood outside of his getting lost in the Temple, as we’ve heard in last week’s Gospel reading. We DO get, however, an account of Jesus’ being baptized by John in all four gospels. And while the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us of Jesus’ interactions with John the Baptist with varying degrees of detail, a common element among these narratives is the fact that at some point in Jesus’ baptism, the spirit appears or descends; and in the passage we heard today, also proclaims, *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*
3. Although the Spirit’s proclamation of Jesus’ identity appears particularly personal (it speaks to Jesus specifically as the Beloved). It takes place in a rather public setting. Notice that unlike other versions of the story where there was a dialog between John and Jesus—on whether or not Jesus needed to be baptized by John to begin with—in the passage that we heard today, Jesus comes to John as part of the crowd, making it sound as if Jesus was just one of many who was seeking repentance after hearing John’s preaching. But if Jesus, as we have come to know him now, after two

thousand years of Christian theology and doctrine, is the sinless Son of God, why would Jesus need cleansing? Why is he in need of repentance? It does not seem to make sense! Perhaps there is something more than just the act of immersing oneself in the river here.

4. What the Church wants us to take to heart today is the message that, in Jesus, God enters the world not just as a distant immovable judge but as someone who lives in solidarity with every other creature out there—as we mentioned, last week—in the midst of the world’s sin and brokenness; and also, in the midst of the small victories and manifestations of goodness it contains. In accepting baptism from John, Jesus is not so much repenting as he infusing the experience of the ritual and cleansing bath with a deeper layer of meaning: that those who are bathed are not realigned with God’s righteousness. Instead, they are also given a new identity: that of child and beloved; that of one for whom and of whom God is proud and pleased.
5. Now this is significant because from our experience of world—especially now where we inhabit “secure systems” (systems where we are forced to guard our identity for fear of impersonation or, even worse, theft)—the very first thing that we lose (so that we could be kept secure) is our identity. We exist in systems where we are not called by name; but instead, we’re member number or customer number or user number. And what is it that I hear a lot that frustrates most consumers? The fact that a service for which they are paying or an entity that they’re supporting with their livelihood “treats them as if they’re just another number.”
6. The Baptism of Jesus—and for that matter our Baptism in Jesus—reclaims for us an identity that is more secure than whatever LifeLock could provide for you: it is the identity of God’s beloved child—**God’s beloved child for whom God will seek after; God’s beloved child whom God shall protect and uphold.**
7. The words of the Prophet Isaiah today are replete with God’s undying interest and concern for the Beloved—for us. It harkens back to the images of the Exodus (the passing through the waters, the walking through fire), that event in the history of the people of Israel where, as slaves in Egypt they were also once deprived of their identity. Now, as they emerge from the Babylon, God—through the prophet—wants to assure them that God is giving them yet a new identity—that of precious and honored. But there’s more... God’s making a promise that this new identity is no longer going to

be bound by ethnicity or land—but that, as a people they will be brought from far away—from all directions.

8. Now, it's important for us to hear this, because—especially now, there are systems in our midst—that want us to be fearful of our differences (that want us to focus on those symbolic directions—north, south east and west); that capitalize on the human tendency to stick with our kindred—with those who look like us, or think like us or believe like us. But the identity that God bestows to us—as his beloved, his chosen, the people of whom God is proud—at least if we're going to believe Scripture—has none of that. Instead the prophecy tells us that—beyond that of the covenant with Israel—God's work is about bringing us back to the moment of creation where, using the New English Translation of the Bible, God says, *“everyone who belongs to me, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed—yes, whom I made... bring to me!”*
9. Recapturing a new identity; being convinced that we are God's beloved regardless of where we hail from, regardless of where and how we find ourselves—even for the pious, these can difficult concepts to grasp, much less, difficult realities to live into each day. I believe it is for this reason—that in the development of the church—as we heard in the second lesson—there's a need not just to accept Jesus in the proclamation of the word, there's a necessary element of also receiving the Holy Spirit. Now, Acts, being the sequel, if you will, to Luke's Gospel, mentions this for two reasons: the first is to parallel what we heard in the Gospel (that Jesus, to whom we are configured in Baptism, had the moment where the Spirit descended like a dove); and second—and, equally important—because it is the Spirit who functions as our helper—as our advocate, who, in other parts of the Scripture, is described as the one who will help us remember these things! But again, there's more: notice that in the lesson from Acts—the spirit is received through the ministry of the laying on of hands. Now while some might say that that is symbolic of the episcopacy, I think its far more basic: that the Spirit is received in the company of the believers—that the truth of our adoption by God, the truth of our being favored by God and is made more real (made more tangible) when we're surrounded by the God's people. It is for this reason why the church—why we—are truly concerned about reaching out not just in prayer for one another, but also through fellowship and by our caring community—for those in parish, but,

true to the first lesson, to everyone God has claimed for his own in our neighborhood. It is for this reason that when we renew our Baptismal Vows in a few moments we just don't recommit to continue in the apostles teachings and prayers; we also recommit to serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; and respecting the dignity of every human being.

10. Today, as we are renewed by the God's Word and the Holy Sacrament, and as we renew our Baptismal Covenant, may what we do here give us the courage, the strength and the perseverance to allow our actions for the benefit of the world to speak loudly and clearly of the faith that we speak in Jesus' Name.
11. And to God who seeks after us; the God who gives us a new identity as his children in Jesus; the God who sustains us in the Spirit... to this God be honor and glory now and forever. AMEN.